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ABSTRACT

The Americas conventionally are divided into two continents, North and South America, with the place of demarcation at the border between Panama and Colombia. Yet a generation of students is growing up with the broad but imprecise term Latin America, referring to all of those countries south of the United States, while North America has come to mean only Canada and the United States. Mexico and Central America should be included when teachers instruct their students about North America. Mexico ranks eleventh in the world in population and has an area of about three quarters of a million square miles. It is almost as urbanized as the United States and Canada, with over 70 percent of its population classed as urban. Yet textbooks and teachers continue to devote major attention to a Mexico of peasants. Mexico is a newly industrialized country of considerable accomplishments and tremendous potential. Over 80 percent of the population is literate with a sizable and growing segment university trained and possessing a tradition of hard work. The conventional stereotype of the lazy Mexican is sadly inaccurate, and its correction should be a major objective for teachers. The business community is beginning to consider Mexico as an integral part of North America, and hopefully the U.S. public in general and geography teachers in particular will do so in the future. (JB)

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TEACHING ABOUT NORTH AMERICA: SOME FRESH PERSPECTIVES

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As its title states, the main purpose of this paper is to promote a view of North America that differs from that in current use. But it has a secondary objective as well. This is to arrest and if possible to reverse a trend in teaching that I regard as harmful to useful geographic understanding. The first of these aims is a single suggestion: give your students a vision of a continent that includes Canada, the USA, and Mexico and Central America. The secondary goal is to stop the increasing practice of teaching that North America or North American means the same as the area of the United States and Canada. The second of these issues is addressed first because I believe this sequence makes my main theme more understandable, and I hope more convincing.

The Americas conventionally are divided into two continents - North and South America - with the place of demarcation at the border between Panama and Colombia. This concept is accepted with rare exceptions in lists of world continents and in accounts of physical features. Most atlases and especially those used commonly in schools (see Goode's, Hammonds, McGraw-Hill, etc.) habitually portray topical data on these two regional scales. Little deviation of usage exists as well with respect to most continental sub-divisions such as Alaska, the Canadian Shield, New England, or the Great Plains.

What I perceive to be a problem, however, is the terminology used increasingly to designate the two major culture realms of the Americas. Those countries where the dominent languages and associated cultures are Spanish and Portuguese are regarded - and taught - as being part of a Latin America. Until the past several decades countries where English and its associated culture elements dominate were regarded as being part of an Anglo-America. As several generations of geography teachers during this century pointed out to their students, not everyone nor every part of Anglo-America is English in speech and culture but the designation serves the purpose of a broad generalization. Similarly, the area south of the United States regarded as Latin America is not uniformly Latin in culture and custom.

What has occurred in recent decades is that the broad but imprecise term "Latin America" continues to be used with almost no exceptions, whereas the no more flawed term "Anglo-America" is becoming an uncommon appelation both inside and outside geography. The change is particularly evident in textbooks. Widely-adopted college texts by English and by DeBlij and Muller equate North America with the US and Canada. A recent edition of a regional geography text by Stansfield and Zimolzak narrowly avoided adopting that usage but then retained their previous United States and Canada designation. Competitive books by Wheeler and Kostbade and by Fisher, however, continue to offer students the concept of an Anglo-America.

An example of what in my opinion is misuse is the treatment of a map by Joel Garreau. Garreau - a journalist - applied imagination and superior writing skills to produce the popular book Nine Nations of North America. Regardless of the actual validity of his regions, the approach caused a broad cross-section of Americans to think in unconventional ways about the geography of their country. For one of his nations Garreau envisioned a"Mex-America" of blended cultures that straddled the established political border and produced a map on which such a pattern was displayed. However, the trained geographer, Peter Muller (on page 245) included an account of Garreau's imaginative treatment in his chapter on "North America" but used a map on which Mex-America ends at the US-Mexican border. Those students who study such a map carefully thus will remember that North America embraces only two countries and that Mex-America extends only to the southern edge of the United States.

It is practices such as this example that give concern about the sort of images of the Hemisphere currently being imprinted in the minds of a generation of students. This concern is accentuated by the reality that many of these college students shortly will teach in our public schools. Perhaps I have missed some dialogue but I cannot remember reading any compelling reasons for the abandonment of the concept of an Anglo-America. The trend described is particularly mystifying in light of the increased public awareness of a Latin America and the recent popular culture visualization of a Mex-America. For example, use in teaching of this latter idea leaves unanswered in students minds just what to call the area that lies north of the cultural interface labeled Mex-America. Perhaps some reader can explain the logic and purpose for the demise of Anglo-America in the teaching of geography.

This elaborate windup - and mild tirade - leads to my principal purpose. This is that we should begin to teach students about a North America that includes three of the world's largest and most important countries: Canada, the United States, and Mexico. Canada is very large in area but not in population. The USA ranks fourth in the world in each. Mexico has an area of about three quarter of a million square miles and currently stands eleventh in the world in population total. In economic terms the USA leads the world in Gross National Product, whereas recent data showed Canada ranked eighth and Mexico thirteenth and not far from eleventh. Mexico's $164 billion was less than half of Canada's $347 billion but was over a third larger than that of fourteenth-ranked Switzerland. Admittedly Mexico's per capita GNP is relativelt low, but then so too is that of the USSR and China which both rank above it in gross GNP.

Numbers of this sort mask widespread poverty of course, but they do so in nearly all other coutries with high gross GNP's as well. The USA, USSR, UK, and Italy come quickly to mind. Yet for coutries such as these the images taught often focus more on their national accomplishments than on

their deficiencies. For Mexico, on the other hand, students and the general public are customarily given views of poverty and dispair. It is my position that a greater balance in presentation is needed - for all countries. For example, textbooks increasingly emphasize the urban developments of the USA and Canada, presumably on the premise that roughly three fourths of the population in each country is classed as urban. On a national basis Mexico is almost equally urbanized (over 70 percent), with over half its total population living in the metropolitan areas of Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey. Yet textbooks - and teachers - continue to devote major attention to a Mexico of campesinos and of a pressing need for rural land reform rather than of an urban population with needs of a different sort. Traditonal Mexico fortunately has not disappeared but it constitutes a steadily diminishing part of a country where drastic changes of many sorts are occurring..

The poverty of too many of its people and its foreign debt problems notwithstanding, Mexico is a Newly Industrialized Country (NIC) of considerable accomplishments and tremendous potential. This latter assessment is based in part on its mineral and energy wealth, its size in area and population, and its location. It is in North America and shares a border of nearly 2,000 miles with the world's leading economy. Less well recognized is a population over eighty percent literate, a sizeable and growing segment of which is university-trained, which has a tradition of hard work. The conventional stereotype of the lazy Mexican is sadly inaccurate and its correction should be a major objective for teachers. The mechanical, construction, and agricultural skills of ordinary Mexican workers are exceptional, and I have to assume without as much direct experience that they do as well in more modern technological fields. Also less known is the fact that Mexico has an excellent modern infrastructure. This includes high-speed interstate-style highways connecting major cities, a well-maintained rail system, excellent domestic air service, and a widely extended electical distribution system. The telephone sytem is less efficient but is in the process of being brought up to First World standards.

Mexico's proximity to the United States is reflected in a growing cultural and economic integration. The economic integration is most obvious in Mexico where factories with US corporate names (as well as those from other countries) sit in clusters on the margins of most cities, including many small ones, and US brandname products - many of which are made in Mexico - are sold in stores and even in rural bodegas. On the US side the economic ties tend to be human, with Mexican workers important in specialty agriculture, retail food industries, and factory labor, especially in the garment industries. Culturally one finds US television shows and movies shown as normal fare throughout Mexico, automobiles with US corporate names

(often made in Mexico), and US franchise food chains in all cities. On a personal level both societies have accepted foods and various language terms common to the other. In short, although they remain distinct, the people of the USA and Mexico are becoming more alike in the mundane aspects of daily life.

Whether or not the US public in general and geography teachers in particular accept the reality of Mexico as an integral part of North America, the business community is beginning to. For example, in 1981, before its economy suffered a downturn, Mexico took $20 billion of US exports. In 1988 even with a stagnant economy with less than one percent annual growth Mexico took $23 billion of US goods and services. This total was greater than that of any country in Asia except Japan and was only slightly less than that of Japan.

Perhaps the best-known example of economic integration is the maquiladora program. This arrangement allows US companies to assemble components imported into Mexico duty-free and then to re-export the finished products, paying duty only on the value added in Mexico. Wages paid are above average for Mexico but low by US standards. The practice enrages the US labor movement but it has benefitted Mexican workers who can find employment without leaving the country as well as the consuming public in the US who get quality goods at lesser prices. Japanese corporations have become very much involved in a variation of the same scheme, especially in northwest Mexico where Tiajuana now is the world's largest manufacturer of television sets.

Much more could be added to this account but my purpose is not to present a comprehensive survey. Rather I hope to persuade more teachers to think of Mexico, the USA, and Canada as part of an inter-related region, much as we now comfortably regard Western Europe. The United States and Canada have concluded a free-trade ageement and both countries are exploring comparable arrangments with Mexico, so the analogy with the Western Europe of 1992 is apt. "Island" maps and accompanying "island" descriptions do a disservice to students who will live their adult lives in an increasingly more culturally and economically integrated North America.

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